

Dawn and Mary

Early one morning several teachers and staffers at a grade school are in a meeting. The meeting goes for about five minutes when the teachers and the staffers hear a chilling sound in the hallway. *We heard pop pop pop*, said one of the staffers later.

Most of the teachers and the staffers dove under the table. That is the reasonable thing to do and that is what they were trained to do and that is what they did.

But two of the staffers jumped, or leapt, or lunged out of their chairs, and ran toward the bullets. *Jumped* or *leapt* or *lunged* – which word you use depends on which news account of that morning you read. But the words all point in the same direction – toward the bullets.

One of the staffers was the principal. Her name was Dawn. She had two daughters. Her husband had proposed to her five times before she said yes and finally she said yes and they had been married for ten years. They had a cabin on a lake. She liked to get down on her knees to work with the littlest kids in her school.

The other staffer was named Mary. She had two daughters. She was a crazy football fan. She had been married for thirty years. They had a cabin on a lake. She loved to go to the theater. She was going to retire in one year. She liked to get down on her knees to work in her garden.

The principal told the teachers and the staffers to lock the door behind her and the other staffer and the teachers and the staffers did that. Then Dawn and Mary ran out into the hall.

You and I have been in that hallway. You and I spent years in that hallway. It's friendly and echoing and when someone opens the doors at the end of the hallway a wind comes and flutters through all the kids' paintings and posters on the tile walls. Some of the tiles are clay self-portraits by kindergarten kids. Their sculptures were baked in a kiln and glued to the walls and every year there are more portraits, and pretty soon every tile on these walls will have a kid's face, and won't that be cool?

The two women jumped, or leapt, or lunged, toward the bullets. Every fiber in their bodies, bodies descended from millions of years of bodies leaping away from danger, must have wanted to dive under the table. That's what you are supposed to do. That's what you are trained to do. That's how you live another day. That's how you stay alive to paint with the littlest kids and work in the garden and hug your daughters and drive off laughing to your cabin on the lake.

But they leapt for the door, and the principal said *lock the door after us*, and they lunged right *at* the boy with the rifle.

The next time someone says the word *hero* to you, you say this: There once were two women. One was named Dawn and the other was named Mary. They both had two daughters. They both loved to kneel down to care for small holy beings. They leapt out of their chairs and they ran right at the boy with the rifle, and if we ever forget their names, if we ever forget the wind in that hallway, if we ever forget what they did, if we ever forget how there is something in us beyond sense and reason that snarls at death and runs roaring at it to defend children, if we ever forget that all children are our children, then we are fools who allowed memory to be murdered too, and what good are we then? *What good are we then?*

Brian Doyle

How to Change a Diaper

First, approach the subject carefully, ideally toward the head and not the tail, and keep both of your hands open and ready in case of sudden motion on the part of the subject. Subjects have a tendency to yaw and pitch and roll and wiggle and thrash and tumble and jiggle and twist in shocking and amazing ways. Be cautious at all times. Repetition dulls the senses; even if you have performed this maneuver a thousand times, approach it as if it was the first time, or there will be yawing and thrashing and things will not end well.

Second, come prepared. You want extra of everything and you want everything within easy reach. My advice is to lay in a serious supply of towels, bandages, powder, diapers, pins, thumbtacks, tape, buttons (because that day *will* come when you need a button, and if you do not *have* a stray button, you will, as I can attest, actually have to yank the lowest button off your favorite work shirt, or assassinate a cuff button with deep sadness in your heart, because what is more forlorn than a cuff without its button, and right here I know you are asking yourself, why in heaven's name did he need a button while changing a diaper, and the answer is I don't want to talk about it), wipes, soap, more powder, a scissors, an emery board (just on principle, because the phrase *emery board* is a cool phrase), and a photograph of the child's beloved mother, to calm the child down if things go terribly, terribly wrong.

Third, my advice is to conduct the whole operation on a king bed or on the floor or on the beach. It's harder for a kid to wriggle all the way to the edge of a king bed than it is for him to make it over the edge of that damned tinny foolish rickety diaper-changing table which was supposed to be the be-all and end-all of diaper-changing equipment but turned out to be as sturdy as the morals of a television preacher with a cabaret hostess and a private plane. The whole thing about the time the kid made it over the edge is another thing I don't want to talk about here.

Fourth, face up to the fact that what is about to happen is horrifying. No one talks about this. Everyone talks about miracles, and love, and affection, and pride of paternity, and the first hints of feeling responsible for another being for the first time in your whole life, which is an unnerving feeling, just like the feeling you get when you know you are getting sick and there's nothing you can do about it. But no one talks about what actually happens, which is awful. I don't want to talk about it.

Finally, when you are done, and the child is burbling happily, or screaming his head off for his beloved mother, dispose of the evidence in the diaper bucket, from which come all the stench in the world and where all stench goes to die. Then strap the child to the diaper-changing table, if you are still fool enough to use that damned diaper-changing table, or fence him in on the bed with pillows and cabaret hostesses, and wash your hands one million times, with soap, all the way to your elbows. Then, just for fun, go roll the child around the bed for a while as if the bed was a lawn and the child was one of those old lawnmowers with no engine and the dullest blades in the history of the universe. Then take a nap, which you have richly earned. If you have a crib, deposit the child, while waving the photograph of his beloved mother to calm him down and make him think she is near. If you do not have a crib, strap the child to your chest with the belt you used to use when you were a larger man, and then take a nap. Have I actually done this, strapped a child to my chest with what I have to say was a *very* well-used and *very* soft belt, and then napped with him? I don't want to talk about it.

Brian Doyle